

Overcoming **LIFE'S TRAUMA**

Find Closure to the Abuse, Tragedies, and Suffering of Life

Ben S. Howard

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To Janine, Matthew, and Esther—
you are loved and missed!

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Chapter 1

The Beginning

The knowledge in this book has the power to alter the course of your life forever. There are no mystical secrets to be found here. There is no magical formula or trick. It is much more basic than that. In these pages you will find simple, *Universal Truths* that when applied, bring more freedom and joy than can be imagined.

No matter how pure the intent or how important the topic, I believe that sharing *what to do* without actually sharing *how to do it* is a disservice and a frustration to the receiver. I can't tell you how many times I have sat and listened to some teacher tell me all the things I should or should not be doing, without offering the slightest insight on how. That being considered, this book is a *working* book. It will require your effort and participation as we go through the process of learning, experiencing, and applying the principles

presented in these pages. With that in mind, let us turn to the topic at hand.

The things that happen to us in life affect us all. We suffer loss, neglect, abandonment, betrayal, abuse, violence, and every other imaginable injury and trauma. These traumas become part of our being, and they affect every part of our spiritual, emotional and physical life.

The purpose of this book is to help you better understand these injuries and traumas and, more specifically, why we have so much trouble letting them go. You will gain the knowledge, skills and understanding necessary to overcome these hurts of life, as well as having the opportunity to let them go forever.

Chapter 2



The Boy

Let me begin by telling you a story about a boy. He comes from a loving family who nurtures and cares for him. His future couldn't look brighter. What this small innocent child doesn't know is that at about age 2, he will be diagnosed with severe Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). He won't understand why he sees doctors that want to know why he does what he does, or why they give him strange tests and experiment with harsh psychotropic drugs to make him "*better*."

At age 8, his mother will tell him about his problem and how he is not like the other children. What the boy will hear is that he is broken and that he is not and never will be "*normal*."

This little guy does not know that by age 9 he will be sexually abused by a neighbor.

This boy will be raised in a good home, but life away from home will be torture. At age 10, while playing with friends in the bus line at school, things will get a bit too rough and out of hand. A teacher will single out this boy and grab him by the thumb, forcing it into his palm until it becomes dislocated. The more the boy cries in pain, the harder the teacher will push, smiling all the while as if enjoying the boy's suffering. In an attempt to stop the severe pain, the boy will finally punch her in the face breaking her glasses. He will become the first boy ever expelled from grade school. The teacher will never be held accountable for the injuries caused by the physical abuse.

Because of his emotional instability due to his ADHD, he will be taught never to fight, hit, etc. for any reason. He will not fight back in any way when challenged or confronted. As a result, when this boy reaches junior high, he will become the school "*pick on.*" He will live in constant fear of getting beaten up at school, and the fear will be proven justified almost daily. One of the most unjust problems with being the school pick on is that YOU are always at the center of the problem. It is assumed by the authority figures at school that you are the problem. So while the bullies

are sent back to class, the boy would be sent to the principal's office. In those days, corporal punishment, such as paddling with a large wooden board, was an acceptable means of behavior modification at schools. So after being beaten up by the bullies at school this boy will then be taken to the principal's office and beaten again.

Finally, the boy cannot take the beatings any longer, and at age 14 he will pull a knife at school and threaten to kill a kid if he touches him again. The kid's friends will retaliate by taking a couple of shots with hunting rifles in the general direction of the boy. The boy will go to his parents and other authority figures about the problem but will be told he is "blowing things out of proportion." Since no one will believe him, he will decide that he needs to run away for a while until things cool off. He will be gone for about three days and return at about 2 a.m. in the morning. He will go into his parent's room and tell them he is home. His mother will call the authorities, and the next morning he will be awakened by sheriff's deputies and taken to a county lockup, without the opportunity to even get dressed. He will be humiliated as he is paraded through the public courthouse without

proper clothing and spend the next ten days in jail. The conditions will be bad and the poor quality and little amount of food even worse. He will lose almost ten pounds in those ten days. This event will mark the end of his emotional bond to his family for the next seven years.

At age 15 he will leave home, and by age 16 move to Los Angeles California to marry his high school girlfriend. Being too young to know how to care for and treat a young wife, he will divorce by age 21.

At this point, the boy in our story has barely reached adulthood and his life has been full of trauma and pain.

What do you think will happen to this boy?

What kind of person will he become?

What are the odds he'll end up in long-term prison?

Would violence almost certainly be part of this young man's life?

Will he re-create and pass on the violent traits so prevalent in his early childhood?

Would sexual confusion and/or deviance be a real possibility?

How about his career?

Will he be able to keep gainful employment?

Will he have issues with authority?

How about anger issues?

How might the effects of anger and resentment be played out in his life?

What about relationships?

Will this young man ever be able to form healthy and trusting bonds in relationships?

What kind of father will this young man become?

Will his children be safe?

What patterns will be passed on to the next generation?

What will become of his children?

The answers to these questions are frightening. Everything we know from psychology and criminology suggests the boy is going to have major problems. With each new victimization, the odds of alcoholism, chemical abuse and addiction increase.

I attended a Victims Advocate Training Program where an expert in chemical dependency and addiction gave the odds of a person becoming addicted based on certain life circumstances. I added up all the numbers from this boy's life, and theoretically, he had a 255% chance of becoming chemically dependent. Not good odds to say the least. He is likely to be in and out of the court system for various crimes. That bright future he had when we began his story at age 2 has certainly faded away if not vanished all together.

So what did happen to this boy? Well, I can tell you from personal experience that none of those possibilities came to be in MY life. Yes, this is my story. I experienced the things in this story and many more as a child and although it was not easy, I was able to overcome them all.

With the help of a few good friends and some family members, I pulled my life together, and at age 24

met and married a wonderful woman named Janine with whom I would share a healthy, happy life. We had four beautiful children—Rachel, Matthew, Esther, and Caleb. We were as close to the perfect family as I could hope for. Sixteen amazing years passed and life had turned out great.

That's when I got the call.

Chapter 3

The Call

It was mid-afternoon on June 28th. My brother and his family had just moved from out of state to a town about an hour and a half away from our home. We had moved from the same general location they had lived the previous year. The cousins had not seen each other in that time, and we had planned to get together on a Thursday to exchange kids for a sleep over. The children were excited to be reunited with the cousins. I had some work to do at my office and was going to meet Janine and the kids at my brother's house. I wrapped things up at my desk, called my wife, and asked her to run a quick errand for me on the way, then headed out.

I was picking up a trailer for my brother when the phone rang. It was my good friend and business associate. He said, "Ben, I need you to stop whatever you're doing and listen to what I have to tell you . . .

there's been an accident. I think it's serious. I just got a call from someone who saw the advertising phone number we have on your car window. It sounds real bad. I don't know anything else."

I asked him where the accident happened, and he told me. I was five minutes ahead of them. I turned around and raced to the scene. I pulled up to a roadblock where state police had secured a perimeter. A quarter mile down the highway, a great number of emergency workers swarmed the scene. As I jumped from my truck, a Life Flight helicopter took off and accelerated over my head to the South and an ambulance sped away to the north, siren screaming.

I approached the officer at the roadblock and told him I had received a call that my family was involved in an accident. He asked me what kind of car they were driving, and I gave him a description. He paled as he told me to hold on. He got on his radio to someone up at the site and informed the person, "The father is here and wants to come up to the crash site." The response was short, grim, and terrifying, "That would NOT be advisable." As the radio transmission ended, my heart broke, lodging firmly in my throat as I realized that death had entered my life.

I asked the officer for the status of my family and was informed that someone would come and speak with me shortly. A sheriff's deputy came down from the site a few minutes later. Again I asked the status of my family. He hemmed and hawed a bit so I pressed him further. I said, "I know I have lost family up there. I can feel it. I need to know if I have anyone left, and if so, where they're being taken." After a long pause he said, "I'm sorry sir, but your wife and one of your children are dead in the car. A little boy and girl were flown to a pediatric trauma center about thirty-five miles to the south. The little girl was non-responsive when they left. Another child has been taken by ambulance to a hospital about six miles to the north."

I knew the two little ones would be Esther and Caleb but didn't know which of my children was dead. I asked the deputy who had been taken in the ambulance. He said he did not know. I asked whether the child still in the car was a boy or a girl so that I could determine who had been taken. The deputy radioed up to the crash site and asked. The response was sterile and to the point, "Too much damage, unable to identify gender." I nearly collapsed.

I was in a daze. Time began to slow. I was losing control of my faculties. Seeing my emotional crisis and desperate need for answers, the deputy contacted the ambulance crew and determined that they had a girl and she had been slipping in and out of consciousness. I then knew my 11 year-old son, Matthew, was dead.

My friend who had called me arrived and caught me up in a hug as I told him the news through my tears.

There was no time to grieve, no time to acknowledge the loss. I had to think, make decisions of where to go first and what to do.

Since my daughter Rachel had been semiconscious, I decided to get to her as she was alone and might be aware of what was going on. My friend drove and we headed to the hospital just six miles away. We were on the wrong side of the accident and were locked in the traffic with everyone else so it took an agonizing fifty-five minutes to reach the hospital. When we arrived, Rachel had been sedated and was being wheeled out to be transferred to a level-one trauma unit by helicopter. Before I could do much of anything she was gone. Again, I was on the wrong side of the accident, and I didn't know how to get to the hospital where all my children now

were. It took another two hours and fifteen minutes to reach the hospital and the remnants of my once happy family.

I arrived to the most horrific scene I have ever experienced. There, in the pediatric ICU and Emergency Center, I found three rooms. Bloody gauze, sheets, and medical implements were strewn seemingly without care. Two of the rooms were empty, and I was afraid of what that might mean. In the remaining room, I found my daughter Rachel, bruised, unconscious, and on life support. I was informed that Caleb had a very small chance of survival and that Esther was much worse off than him. Members of my extended family had arrived before I did and continued to come.

When Esther was finally brought back to her room, she was so badly disfigured that I could barely recognize her as my daughter. I could hardly bear to see her in such a condition. Over the next twenty-four hours, Esther would succumb to her injuries and die. To my great sorrow, I would not be by her side when she left this life. Rachel awoke and was asking for her mother, Caleb was going downhill fast, and medical decisions had to be made by what seemed like the hour. Organ donor

choices had to be completed. I finally collapsed on a cot in a tiny closet-size room off the ICU. Laying there in the dark, I realized I didn't even know where they had taken the bodies of my wife and son. I began to tremble and shake so badly that I eventually threw up. My sister came in and sat with me until I fell asleep. She was very patient.

As Caleb deteriorated, I got a crash course in brain trauma, coma, and intercranial pressure and quickly became versed in what each of the readouts on the many machines in his room meant. On the second day, Caleb's brain pressure was high and his brain activity became virtually zero. As I sat quietly in his room with the door mostly closed, I overheard a couple of nurses talking in the hall about how sad it was that I had already lost three members of my family, and it was most likely only a matter of time before it became four. I sat there in silence crying and praying.

On July 4th, my daughter Rachel was stable enough to be released. We drove the fifty miles home together and entered the house for the first time since the accident. Coats that would never be used again hung on hooks by the door. Toys that would never be played with again lay randomly across the living room floor. A list sat on the counter of all the

activities the kids could do with their cousins when they got back to the house. Dinner had been thawing in the oven waiting to be turned on. There would be no celebrating this fourth of July.

Rachel was afraid to sleep alone in the empty house and curled up next to me on her mother's side of the bed. We lay there awake listening to the pop of fireworks in the distance. I don't remember sleeping.

We waited nine days for the funeral. I didn't know if there would be another body to bury, and I couldn't go through a funeral twice in one week. Miraculously, small spikes, bumps and waves began to appear on the readouts and screens in Caleb's room. Brain activity was beginning to reappear. So, with a little faith, I moved forward with the funerals.

On July 7th, I pulled up to a chapel with three hearses parked in front. I was shocked and disturbed by the sight. We had a beautiful service and the eighteen pallbearers carried my wife and children gently to the mass open grave. With little time to grieve, we prayed, walked away from the graves, and returned to the hospital.

This tragedy was only beginning as I would be working with a traumatized daughter, grappling not only with the death of so many of her family, but also

her own survival. We would spend months in hospitals and rehabilitation centers trying to recover as much of Caleb as possible.

This story does not end. I would later learn that an impaired driver had killed my family. Life would never be the same again. The trials of this accident would continue in various forms for many years to come.

I acknowledge here and now that I have no idea the suffering you have been through in your life or the exquisite agony that your own traumas and trials have caused. I didn't tell you my story to shock you, to make you feel pity, or to make you think I've had it worse. I shared it so that you would know that I've had a little experience with pain; I know a little about suffering. And . . .

. . . I have found a way out!